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Fitting Climax To Accomac's Noble Career

By MICHAEL ARTHUR RORER

If they insisted on reting you at age 36, because new equipment had made your trade obsolete, would you go quietly? Or would you, like the poet Dylan Thomas, "rage, rage against the coming of the night?"

A few weeks ago the good ship Accomac chose Thomas's way: she made a blazing exit that took an LST, an excursion boat, and three piers with her.

On April 15, the Accomac, along with six other Little Creek-Kiptopeke ferries, was replaced by the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel. Smallest, oldest, but fastest of the ferry fleet, the Accomac apparently did not take kindly to her retirement.

Her spectacular end, described by Portsmouth firmen as "the worst fire in the city's history," marked a fitting climax to a noble career.

Built at Quincy, Mass., in 1928, as the New York, Philadelphia, & Norfolk Railroad Company's Virginia Lee, she had raced her passengers from the foot of Brooke Avenue, Norfolk, across to the Eastern Shore to their waiting trains at Cape Charles throughout the 1930's and into the early 1940's.

The then steam-powered vessel had been one of three new boats to commence service in Hampton Roads in 1928, when three of the great steamship lines operating on the Chesapeake built their last and finest steamers.

THE YORKTOWN, built by the Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Co., made her debut for the Chesapeake Steamship Company that season; the President Warfield, built by the Pusey & Jones Corp., of Wilmington, Del., was brought out by the Old Bay Line; and the Virginia Lee was introduced by the Pennsylvania Railroad's subsidiary, New York, Philadelphia & Norfolk.

All three of these vessels responded to the call of war in the spring of 1942, when the War Shipping Administration went up and down the Atlantic Seaboard, commandeering sound and river steamers on short notice for war duty abroad.

Ultimately a little fleet of former bay boats under British command steamed quietly up the coast to St. John's, Newfoundland, there to be dispatched in convoy for the Atlantic crossing. The President Warfield and the Yorktown sailed with the famous "skimming dish" convoy for England on Sept. 21, 1942.

The Virginia Lee, however, always with a mind of her own, apparently looked the situation over and wanted none of it. She developed structural troubles and suffered a pipe freeze during her conversion. And so the "honeymoon fleet" convoy sailed without her. Instead of being guide on the way across as was the Yorktown or seeing action in the English Channel, as did the President Warfield, the Virginia Lee was finally sent to the Amazon River, in Brazil, where she carried cargoes in a rubber-development program sponsored by the U.S. Government.

At the close of World War II, the Virginia Lee was purchased by B. B. Wills, waterfront entrepreneur of Arlington, Va., who removed her steam engine and converted her to diesel. Renaming her Holiday, Wills planned to use her as an excursion and sightseeing boat in Florida waters.

THE VIRGINIA LEE, however, apparently had no more intention of going down to Florida than she'd had of going off to war. Accordingly, she conveniently ran into a violent storm off Cape Hatteras, N.C., where a lifeboat broke loose and smashed her superstructure, causing extensive and expensive damage.

Disgusted, Wills sold her in 1951 to the Virginia Ferry Corporation, predecessor of the Chesapeake Bay Ferry Commission. The ship was converted to an automobile ferry by the Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company. Renamed Accomac, she joined the Little Creek-Kiptopeke ferries, where she became known to her various captains as the principal vessel in the fleet to protest bitterly any rough seas.

"She'd go where I told her," remarked a former skipper, "but she'd roll like hell. I had more seasick passengers aboard her than on all the other boats put together. Once when chartered for a moonlight excursion off Cape Henry, she was rolling like a ball. I took her out to Thimble Shoal Light, told her seasick guests that they were looking at Cape Henry Lighthouse, and then high-balled it back to the dock. The passengers were too far gone to know the difference."

Because her deck was not high enough to carry big tractor-trailers, the Accomac, despite her speed, was frequently held as the stand-by ferry, often chartered for harbor tours and excursions. On May 5, 1963, she was engaged by the Old Dominion Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society for a memorable seven-hour tour of Hampton Roads. She met the special train, put on for the 610 rail fans by the Chesapeake & Ohio Railway, at Newport News, and toured the entire roadstead for the rest of the day. The then-incomplete Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel, Middle Ground Light, and the site of the Merrimack-Monitor battle were high points of the trip. Performing brilliantly in beautiful weather, the Accomac returned her enthusiastic railfans to their train late that afternoon.

REPURCHASED BY B. B. WILLS earlier this year, she was to have been again renamed Holiday and outfitted as a luxurious floating hotel-restaurant for New England waters, where she would have served as flagship for Tolchester Lines, operated by Wills.

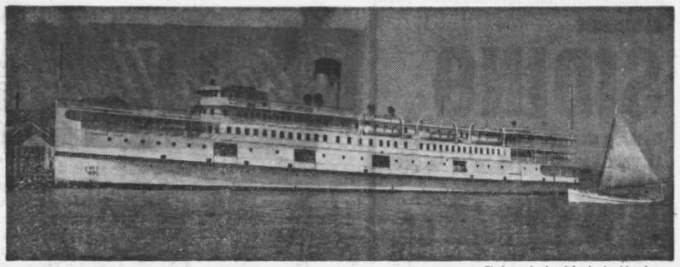
Her conversion was well under way at Pinner's Point when fire broke out aboard on the night of May 27, quickly sweeping through the entire vessel and setting fire to the three piers, and two other craft berthed nearby.

The exact cause of the conflagration still has not been determined. Faulty wiring and sparks from an acetylene welding torch have been advanced as possibilities. But old salts who knew the Accomac's personality have their own ideas.

Whatever the cause of the fire, the Accomac has now joined the other new ships of 1928 who preceded her to Valhalla. The former Chesapeake Liner Yorktown had been the first to go, falling prey to a wolfpack of German U-boats en route to England. Torpedoed on her port side, Sept. 26, 1942, she foundered early the following morning with the loss of many lives.

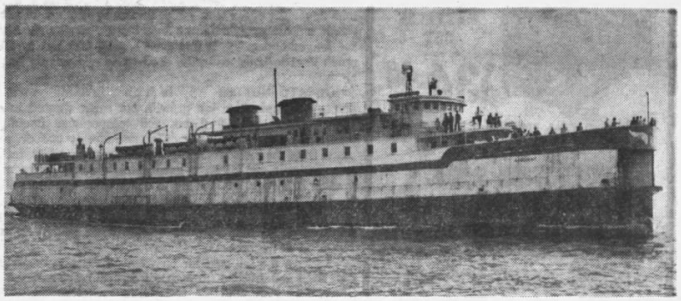
A decade later, the former Old Bay Liner President Warfield, renamed Exodus, had burned to death, Aug. 26, 1952, in the harbor of Haifa, Israel. A carelessly-handled blow-torch was finally held responsible for that fire. Some 5,200 miles apart, the President Warfield and the Virginia Lee have now met similar ends.

Of the three new ships of 1928, only the cremated ghost of the Accomac now remains.

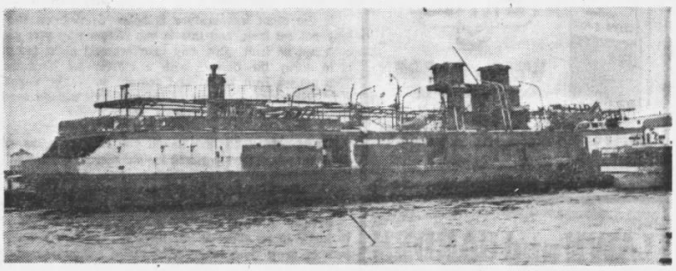


Photographs by John L. Lochhead

The Pennsylvania Railroad ferry steamer Virginia Lee, built in 1928, made daily trips between Cape Charles, Old Point Comfort and Norfolk until taken over by the War Shipping Administration in 1941. She is shown here at the dock at Old Point in the 1930's.



The former steamer Virginia Lee, since converted to diesel power, was acquired for an excursion boat following service in Brazil during World War II and named Holiday. Her next owner, the Chesapeake Bay Ferry Commission altered her to carry cars on the Kiptopeke-Little Creek run.



The diesel ferry Accomac, following the opening of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel, was acquired to be converted once again to an excursion vessel named Holiday. She caught fire on May 28 while alterations were being made to her at Pinners Point, Portsmouth; was severely damaged.

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